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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANTANANARIVO 000103

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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR: A FORK IN THE ROAD?

Classified By: Ambassador Niels Marquardt for reasons 1.4 d and e

¶1. (C) Summary: Madagascar may be approaching -- this week, potentially -- a critical fork in the road to its political future. One way leads through negotiation to a compromise by which Ravalomanana stays at least nominally in power, albeit much weakened, while avoiding further bloodshed. The other has the armed forces, convinced that politicians will not find a way out by themselves, staging a gentle coup to remove Ravalomanana from office, while also preventing Andry Rajoelina from acceding to power. Either scenario will require the emergence of a respected third force, perhaps to serve as an interim prime minister with extraordinary powers delegated from the president. End summary.

¶2. (C) Monday was another extremely tense day in Tana. Angry mobs downtown refused to be persuaded by Andry "TGV" Rajoelina not to follow through on occupying ministries. Security forces used tear gas, blanks, and rubber bullets to keep them from doing so, and managed to kill no one in the process; their clear priority was to avoid further bloodshed at all costs, and they did so masterfully. Security was restored yesterday as night fell. Today TGV has again directed his loyalists to sit-in at ministries, causing a massive show of force which is keeping them at bay as this message is written.

¶3. (C) Responding to an initiative from me and my EU colleague, ambassadors were invited to meet with the President this morning. Rather than receive a small group (as we had proposed), Ravalomanana invited every local COM, for what was no doubt a useful photo op. The ensuing discussion, nonetheless, was far more open and frank than our last such session on January 29. He listened carefully, cut no one off, and declared himself open to dialogue and concessions, specifically mentioning electoral law reform, a constitutional revision, revision of the new political party law, and/or a referendum on his performance. He alluded to the ongoing negotiation between teams representing himself and the mayor -- which I understand would require a new government led by an empowered prime minister, a constitutional revision, and early elections -- without specifically evoking any of these measures.

¶4. (C) Ravalomanana asked me to contact the mayor, arrange urgently for a direct dialogue between the two of them, and, at my request, promised to lift arrest warrants for TGV and others if TGV would suspend his demonstrations. Unfortunately, TGV was not at all interested in this overture. He promised to call me back but never has, and instead went to the Place du 13 Mai and asked his followers to take ministries today. He asked them to do so peacefully, but after yesterday it is unclear that he can still control them. A TGV-led sit-in is in progress as I write this, and much of the city center is cordoned off by security forces, quiet but tense.

¶5. (C) Our senior contacts within the armed forces and with many others in the know here suggest that the military is

within just a few days of putting an end to the political stand-off by intervening itself. No doubt yesterday's tense situation further persuaded them that the status quo is untenable and extremely dangerous. The six most senior officers met the President yesterday and reportedly told him in blunt terms that their patience is nearly at its limit -- the same message we are hearing ourselves. Indeed, only the automatic condemnation of the international community and suspension of most foreign assistance -- which I and others repeatedly have told all parties would indeed befall Madagascar if the military takes action -- seem to be preventing them from doing so already.

16. (C) I conclude that TGV -- who has proven to be idealistic, emotional, and uncompromising -- may well have decided that he will accept nothing less than Ravalomanana's immediate departure. Knowing that he will never get it through negotiation, he is going for broke with this confrontational approach. He got a moral boost on February 7 when the President's forces fired on the crowd, and -- while he vociferously denies this as an objective -- it is clear that spilt blood strengthens his hand over the President's. Hence his decision to spurn today's offer.

17. (C) I and the entire international community continue to push negotiation as the only acceptable solution, stressing the many advantages of remaining within a constitutional framework. The military certainly understand those advantages, and are very reluctant to come across as just another bunch of African coup-plotters; indeed, rather than seeking power, they seem to be avoiding it, but they also feel a strong responsibility to prevent Malagasy from killing Malagasy. Referring to their choice, AU Envoy Amara Essy summed up: "Sometimes it's better to have a bad solution than chaos."

18. (C) With the President apparently willing to negotiate (within limits; he is certainly not ready to resign) but the Mayor not, it is unclear what the international community can do that we are not already doing. We have little leverage over TGV, beyond these arguments and others we have used over and over in our many meetings with him. His main advantage over the President's side comes from his ability to mobilize crowds, so it is not entirely illogical on his part to be unwilling to desist. The other imponderable here is what the President might do unilaterally if he concludes that negotiations are leading nowhere: he might dissolve the government, appoint a new one, give a conciliatory speech, call a national round table, etc. All these steps would be more effective if they came as part of a negotiated solution, and they may come across as "too little, too late." Nonetheless, they are all possibilities at his disposal if the impasse persists.

19. (C) Looking over the horizon, the question looms as to who will be running Madagascar in a few weeks (or months) if not -- or indeed, in addition to -- Ravalomanana? It seems highly unlikely that TGV will find himself in that role, so the quest is open for a viable third party. National Assembly President Sylla is one obvious option, and it seems that he would be open to it. Another name now in circulation here is former Vice Prime Minister Zaza Ramandimbison, a World Bank economist who retains high respect. Finally, what about the National Consultative Conference? The FFKM Church Council continues to prepare for it, having developed a list of some 150 essential invitees. Ravalomanana today told us he was open to a broader dialogue, but including perhaps ten or twelve parties, not dozens.

MARQUARDT